

EAST AND WEST IN COOMARASWAMY'S THEORY OF ART

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Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy's theory of art is the outcome of his commitment to *philosophia perennis*, a philosophy that draws heavily from the varied religions, mystics, systems of philosophy, cultural traditions and schools of art. A product of two cultures, he was able to present a theory succinctly, though there appear certain minor inconsistencies and contradictions.

Coomaraswamy rejected the word *aesthetics*, a word coined by Baumgarten from the Greek. The original Greek word refers to the sensations which represent an organism's reactions to the external world. Such reactions are also noticeable in the world of the plants and animals. Since art is "an intellectual virtue", he refused to accept the expression "disinterested aesthetic contemplation". As Plato said, "we cannot give the name of art to anything irrational".¹ Art is rational and it is also a ritual in which the body, mind, heart, and soul are fully involved. "Art has to do with cognition", as Aquinas stated. Bonaventura remarked that "it is knowledge that makes the work beautiful". Beauty is intelligibility, and it has *claritas*.²

Coomaraswamy traces the various stages in the history of a work of art. These are (i) "an aesthetic intuition", (ii) the "internal expression of this intuition", (iii) the "indication of this by external signs for the purpose of communication", and (iv) "the resulting stimulation of the critic or *rasika* to reproduction of the original intuition, or of some approximation to it". On this view art "is always the externalization of an already completed cycle". Here the critic follows the questionable analysis given by Croce. This is a serious drawback in an otherwise valuable exposition of the nature of art and beauty. The source of the intuition is any aspect of life. The artist intuits in a moment of contemplation. "Creative art is art that

reveals beauty where we should have otherwise overlooked it, or more clearly than we have yet received". Intuition, *pratibhā* as the Indian aestheticians would say, is a valid phase. *Pratibhā* is a form of wisdom (*prajñā*) which is revealed in the expression of the newly arising and awakened intuitions. But does art originate merely from intuition? The Indian critics have stressed also the importance of scholarship and practice. Coomaraswamy's infatuation with Croce's theory made him ignore these valuable aids. Yet he corrected himself even though he stated: "There is always perfect identity of intuition—expression, soul and body."³ This should not lead one to believe that Coomaraswamy was merely following Croce; for he gave new meanings to these terms. "Works of art are reminders; in other words, supports of contemplation". In this context he used the word intuition to mean an intellection of eternal reasons, a contemplation. By expression he meant a begotten likeness. Without contemplation one is only a skilful workman, not an artist.⁴ The practice of art is a form of *Yoga*. The artist is called a *sādhaka*, *mantrin*, or *Yogin*. Art is *Yoga*. "The purpose of *Yoga* is mental concentration" which puts an end to "all distinction between the subject and the object of contemplation". The artist too has the same kind of concentration. As the *Śukranītisāra* says: let the imager establish images in temples by meditation on the deities who are the objects of his devotion. "For the successful achievement of this *Yoga* the lineaments of the image are described in books...In no other way...is it possible to be so absorbed in contemplation, as thus in the making of images."⁵ Śāṅkara observed that the arrow-maker perceives nothing beyond his work when he is buried in it.⁶ In the *Bhāgavata* we read: "I have learned concentration from the marker of arrows". This is of utmost importance since intuition arises only from an intense moment of concentration—what Kālidāsa termed *samādhi* with reference to the painter. *Agni Purāṇa* asks the maker of images to go through ceremonial purification on the night preceding his work and to pray: "O thou Lord of all the gods, teach me in dreams how to carry out all the work I have in my mind."⁷ This approach is intended to emphasise a valid distinction between art and the work of art: "The thing made is a work of art, made by art but not itself art; the art remains in the artist and is the knowledge by which things are made."⁸ As Kuo Jo Hsu of the twelfth century said, "the secret of art lies in the artist himself."⁹ This is not a return to the biography of the artist, but to the nature and tendency of his abiding, eternal consciousness. "Art is that *by* which a man works, supposing that he is in possession of his art and has the habit of his art". Art then is not the end of the

artist's work. "Art remains in the artist".¹⁰ This is because the work is assumed to be completed before the work of transcription is begun.¹¹ Basing this view on the example of Vālmiki, Coomaraswamy quotes Croce's statement that the artist "never makes a stroke with his brush without having previously seen it with his imagination".¹² Accordingly Coomaraswamy states that beauty "does not exist apart from the artist himself, and the *rasika* who enters into his experience".¹³

It is debatable whether the artist has a full and complete vision before he begins his work. One can admit that the artist has only a general vision which seems to embody a value. Even in the case of Vālmiki the poet had only an experience of sorrow (*soka*) when he saw the hunter killing a *Kraunca* bird. It may be that the story of Rāma, he heard from Nārada, assumed after contemplation a symbolic transformation. Coomaraswamy's earlier statements betray his predilections towards an aesthetic mysticism which Croce followed even as he brushed it aside. His later pronouncements were in tune with his concept of the impersonality of art and beauty,

The artist employs the symbolic language because symbols are the universal language of art. The Hindu artist was interested in ideal types and symbols; and even individuals are "symbols of general ideas". The content of the symbol always refers to the metaphysical. Thus Dance is "the manifestation of primal rhythmic energy. Śiva is the Eros Protogonos of Lucian".¹⁴ The symbolic forms have a spiritual significance because they transmit a knowledge of cosmic analogies.¹⁵ The symbols come to artist all of a sudden enabling him to discover connections and relations which eluded him till then. Then "art is the involuntary dramatization of subjective experience" which is crystallized in images. The symbolism of a work of art is "the technical language of quest". It is the supreme quest for freedom, *Mokṣa*, as the Hindu would say. Art yields spiritual freedom which has to be won again. "The vision of even the original artist may be rather a discovery than a creation. If beauty awaits discovery everywhere, that is to say that waits upon our recollection (in the Sufi sense and in Wordsworth's): in aesthetic contemplation. ...we momentarily recover the unity of our being released from individuality". Aesthetic contemplation is thus disinterested and "the spirit is momentarily freed from the entanglement of good and evil".¹⁶ Earlier we noticed his opposition to the expression "disinterested aesthetic contemplation".

This freedom has a specific characteristic. On the one hand it arises from contemplation, from *Yoga*. On the other it is determined by the

traditional discipline from which the artist should not or would not escape. "The artist does not choose his own problems : he finds in the canon instruction to make such and such images in such and such a fashion". The artist has to follow the traditional approach without sacrificing his originality or individuality ; and this is to be accepted by every critic. The ten-armed Mahiṣāsūramardīnī of Jāvā is not cruel, not angry, but sad with the sadness of those who are wise ; and we notice tenderness and peace in the movement of the figure. The death of Hiraṇyakaśipu carved at Ellora, the lay worshippers at a Buddha shrine of Amarāvati, the Dryad of Sanci, the standing Buddhas of Amarāvati and Ceylon, the monkey family of Mamallapuram and the like express "by their action their animating passion".¹⁷ This interpretation does not follow the doctrine of empathy blindly. It departs from this theory even though Coomaraswamy subscribed to such a view at one stage ; for, as he held, art is a form leading us to the realization of oneness with the Absolute, Brahman, who appears as the God of religion. Absolute Beauty is synonymous with God¹⁸. This is in line with the Hindu view that the Absolute is *Sat, cit, Ānanda*-Truth, Consciousness and Bliss. "Most of these works of art are about God, whom we never mention in polite society". The Indian architect was asked to visit heaven through contemplation or in dream and there note the forms which he has to imitate. This cosmic pattern was followed in traditional architecture. Art is "the embodiment in material of a preconceived form".¹⁹ Such a form is presented in the image of Naṭarāja, "an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena".²⁰ The great artist does not seek hedonism (*preyas*) but spiritualism (*śreyas*). The basic problem of art is to give an enduring form to the fleeting visitation of the divine. This approach is nearer to Hegel's.

Clive Bell spoke of "significant form" as the essential characteristic of a work of art. Coomaraswamy modified this expression when he said that the works of art possess significant form in the sense "that they possess that kind of form which reminds us of beauty, and awakens in us aesthetic emotion". It is "such form as exhibits the inner relations of things ; or, after Hsieh Ho 'which reveals the rhythm of the spirit in the gestures of living things". The four-armed Naṭarāja figure reveals the "primal rhythmic energy underlying all phenomenal appearances and activity : here is perpetual movement, perpetually poised the rhythm of the spirit."²¹ That is, the work of art must be complete in itself and yet it must point to something beyond ; it must lead us to a transcendental experience. The Rajput drawings present "a world of imagination and eternity."²² Here

is a conception of art and beauty based on the hieratic or symbolic art of India. Hegel argued in this fashion and yet he condemned the so called symbolic art of India and of the far east without understanding its meaning. As Leonardo da Vinci said, "that figure is most worthy of praise which by its action best expresses the passion that animates it". According to Hsieh Ho "the work of art should exhibit the fusion of the rhythm of the spirit with the movement of living things". The work must possess, says Holmes, "in some degree the four qualities of unity, vitality, Infinity, and Repose". Stating these views with approval, Coomaraswamy observes that "a work of art is great in so far as it expresses its own theme in a form at once rhythmic and impassioned: through a definite pattern it must express a motif deeply felt"²³. This rhythmic activity which is a melody is called *Lilā*. Hence Coomaraswamy could reject Hegelian distinctions of art into symbolic, classical, and romantic. All art is one and it shows no progress.

The Indian approach accepted by Coomaraswamy is from the theory of *rasa*. *Rasa* is identified with beauty, *rasāsvādāna* is equated with aesthetic emotion. The aesthetic experience, as Viśvanātha explains, is pure, indivisible, self manifested, compounded equally of joy and consciousness, free of admixture with any other perception, the very life of it is super-sensuous wonder. Yet Coomaraswamy argues that the expression *rasāsvādāna* is fictitious because *rasāsvādāna* is *rasa*, and vice-versa. In the aesthetic contemplation subject and object are identical, and so are cause and effect²⁴. Are they? At most there can be a similarity, a correspondence, or a transformation.

Beauty is not an object of knowledge because its perception cannot be separated from its very existence. It has no existence apart from perception. Still this experience is not eternal in time, but it is timeless. It is "supersensuous, hyperphysical (*alaukika*) and the only proof of its reality is to be found in experience". This view is similar to the one expressed by Indian critics who saw a similarity, not an identity, between the aesthetic and the religious experiences. But Coomaraswamy treats similarity as identity. "Religion and art are the names for one and the same experience—an intuition of reality and of identity". This is a view accepted by the Neo-Platonists, Hsieh Ho, Goethe, Blake, Schopenhauer, and Schiller, and it is not refuted by Croce. Here Coomaraswamy quotes Clive Bell according to whom pure form is "form not clogged with unaesthetic matter such as associations"²⁵. We differ. The aesthetic experience cannot be the same as the experience of the Absolute. The latter experience has no element of sense, and it is formless, while the former has a concreteness and it does involve the activity of the senses. The Absolute

is not an object of experience for it is said to be one with the subject. On the other hand, the aesthetic experience arises from a given objective existent. To this extent the beauty of the object and the emotion it gives rise to must be inherent in the object. Otherwise we will have a solipsistic theory of art, a theory akin to Croce's; and such a theory cannot insist upon the external existence of a work of art either in the act of composition or in the act of experiencing.

Coomaraswamy, however, accepts the external existence of the work of art since he applies the doctrine of empathy to explain the significance of the work. He even quotes Whitman's lines in defence of his advocacy of empathy :

All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it...

All music is what awakes in you when you are reminded of it by the
instruments.

Elaborating this idea he observes : "In the works called beautiful we recognize a correspondence of theme and expression, content and form... It is our own activity, in the presence of the work of art, which completes the ideal relation (of identity), and it is in this sense that beauty is what we 'do to' a work of art rather than a quality present in the object...In the stricter sense of completed internal aesthetic activity, however, beauty is absolute and cannot have degrees." This leads him to argue that "the vision of beauty is spontaneous... It is a state of grace that cannot be achieved by deliberate effort"²⁶. But if the beauty of a work of art is determined by what we "do to" it, we have to deny objectivity and universality to the experience. Croce and Clive Bell led Coomaraswamy to this solipsistic position whence he could argue that the external signs possess significant form and that this form "reminds us of beauty and awakens in us aesthetic emotion". Elsewhere he referred the signs to the shape, and form to the Idea or Content. This is a serious self-contradiction. Volkelt and Basch spoke of a subconscious, spontaneous, immediate fusion of the percept and the concept. Their theory of sympathetic symbolism would have helped Coomaraswamy in steering clear of the fallacies inherent in Croce's theory.

The problem of sympathetic symbolism in interpreting the concept of beauty is closely related to the general problem of the meaning of art. Indian critics spoke of three main functions of a sign, symbol, or word. These are the primary (*abhidhā*), inferred or implied (*lakṣanā*), and suggested (*dhvani*, *vyājanā*) meanings. The last was taken to be of utmost importance. Coomaraswamy defends the Indian theory of *dhvani* or *vyājanā* (artistic suggestion) when he argues that it is "an improvement of Croce's definition that "expression is art".

Poetry, as Viśvanātha said, is a sentence ensouled by *rasa*—*Vākyam rasātmakam kāvyam*. It is a sentence in which one of the nine *rasas* is suggested or implied. It is “the savouring of this flavour, *rasāsvādanā*, through empathy, by those possessing the necessary sensibility”. This is the condition of beauty. But empathy in his view makes beauty appear as a subjective state. Then a work of art is beautiful only when we impute beauty to it. In such a situation beauty becomes a quality, not the being of the object. This standpoint runs counter to the entire traditional teaching of India by which Coomaraswamy swears. “The true critic (*rasika*) perceives beauty of which the artist exhibits the signs.” He “knows without reasoning whether or not the work is beautiful, before the mind begins to question what it is ‘about’ ”²⁷. Then the critic too must be credited with intuition. In such a case the distinction between the poet and the critic disappears; and this is not borne out in actual experience, particularly with reference to natural beauty. Moreover it rejects any empirical approach. We should rather agree with Volkelt in holding that we must begin with the empirical data, employ whatever methods are fruitful, and then take up a metaphysical stand. Coomaraswamy apparently begins with the metaphysical like the Idealists.

“The concept of beauty originated with the philosopher, not with the artist ; *he* has been ever concerned with saying clearly what has to be said”²⁸. This may be true with reference to the traditional Hindu art where doing well mattered most. The artist seeks to do his job right, while the philosopher brings in the word ‘beautiful’ and lays down its conditions in terms of perfection, harmony, and clarity. Beauty can be said to be the “perfection apprehended as an attractive power”. In the middle ages beauty was said to add “to the good an ordering to the cognitive faculty by which the good is known as such”. Beauty implies cognition, and yet it moves the will, for it is “specifically human”²⁹. Then beauty must be an existent which the artist seeks to reveal to others. It cannot be an adventitious feature of the Good or of the True. Coomaraswamy himself stated : “Beauty is reality as experienced by the artist”. Then does beauty become purely subjective ? Coomaraswamy rejects such a view by bringing in a non-cognitive element. “The world of Beauty, like the Absolute, cannot be known objectively ... The mere intention to create beauty is not sufficient ; there must exist an object of devotion ... We can no more achieve Beauty than we can find Release by turning our backs on the world ... The artist reveals this beauty wherever the mind attaches itself ; and the mind attaches itself, not directly to the Absolute, but to objects of choice”³⁰. Beauty is to be sought in the world in which we

live, even if it were said to be transcendental. It cannot be merely subjective, nor can it be a quality. There appears then to be an inherent contradiction which could have been resolved.

On the nature of beauty again we find some difficulty in understanding the views of Coomaraswamy. Is beauty an intrinsic or an instrumental value? Is it a state of mind or a quality of the object? "The beauty of anything unadorned is not increased by ornament, but made more effective by it. Ornament is characterisation; ornaments are attributes"³¹. Here Coomaraswamy evidently follows Kālidāsa's famous lines in *Vikramorvaśiyam* and *Abhijñāna Śākuntalam*. The beauty of a work of art depends on the perfection achieved. Then it must be integral to the work. If it is a form of perfection, we cannot speak of one work as being more beautiful or less than another work of art. "There are no degrees of beauty... There cannot be any continuous progression in art." This again is Croce's argument; the second sentence alone is valid. Plato and Aristotle had divergent views regarding the relative artistic values of the epic and the tragic. Even in the process of creation we do notice different levels of complexity. But Coomaraswamy argues from another point of view: "Art is an imitation of that perfect spontaneity—the identity of intuition and expression in those who are of the kingdom of heaven, which is within us. Thus it is that art is nearer to life than any fact can be; and Mr. Yeats has reason when he says that Indian music...is not an art, but life itself"³². Likewise the Rajput painters knew that their art had to make human life truly and fully significant. Even in the portrait of a "Dying Man" we have the Muslim "reverence for humanity, and humanism attains an intensity of expression which can only be called religious". Rajput paintings, however, reveal "a profound sense of sympathy for all natural life and a sense of fundamental unity of all created things"³³. This art aimed at "leading out man's thought from self into the universal life around him"³⁴. This approach is largely eclectic and yet it does not deviate from the traditional Indian framework.

Coomaraswamy's account of the Indian theory of beauty was based largely on *Sāhitya Darpana*, *Agni Purāna*, *Vyakti Viveka*, Dhanamjaya's *Daśa Rūpaka* and *Śukra Nīti Sāra*³⁵. This attitude was also influenced by the writings of Aquinas, Lipps, Croce and others, though he differs to some extent because he held that art is cognitive. "Beauty has to do with knowledge and goodness, of which it is precisely the attractive aspect; and since it is by its beauty that we are attracted to a work, its beauty is evidently a means to an end, and not itself the end of art; the purpose of art is always one of effective communication."³⁶ Then beauty becomes an inevitable accident, an

indeterminate end ; for, it is “perfection apprehended as an attractive power”. It is inseparable from truth. This position can be held only with reference to hieratic art. “To do well is to do sacred things.”³⁷ A work is beautiful in terms of perfection, of truth and aptitude ; for then alone can it be said that it is well and truly made³⁸. We read that “Vedic aesthetics consisted essentially in the appreciation of skill”³⁹. This is an understatement, for he did not analyse some significant statements made by the Vedic seers who were also poets.

Aesthetic emotion or *rasa* “is said to result in the spectator, though it is not effectively *caused*, through the operation of determinants (*vibhāva*), consequents (*anubhāva*), moods (*bhāva*), and the eight involuntary emotions (*sattvika bhāva*)”. This statement is based on Bharata and Dhanamjaya. *Vibhāva*s include the aesthetic problem, plot, theme, hero, characters and the like which are, as Croce would say, the “physical stimulants to aesthetic reproduction”. Still the Aesthetic emotion is identical “with that felt when the self perceives the Self”. The consequents are the “deliberate manifestations of feeling”. The moods include the thirty three emotions and the nine permanent ones (*sthāyī bhāva*)⁴⁰. One of the permanent moods must form a master-motif to evoke *rasa*. To this mood are subordinated the expressions of emotion⁴¹. As Bharata said⁴², the first essential of a work of art is unity. If a transient emotion is the master-motif, the work ceases to have *rasa*⁴³. “Pretty art which emphasizes passing feelings and personal emotion is neither beautiful nor true”, for it confuses loveliness and beauty⁴⁴. Loveliness refers to the will and emotions, while beauty is intellectual, metaphysical, and intuitive. Beauty as such has a reference to man’s awareness of the ultimate metaphysical nature of Reality. It is *rasa*.

Aesthetic emotion is *rasa*, according to Coomaraswamy. “The tasting of *rasa* — the vision of beauty — is enjoyed, says Viśvanātha, only by those who are competent thereto.” Dharmadatta, as quoted by Viśvanātha, held that “those devoid of imagination, in the theatre, are but as the wood-work, the walls and the stones”. But “the capacity and genius necessary for appreciation (of poetry) are partly ‘ancient’ and partly cultivated (contemporary) : but cultivation alone is useless, and if the poet is born, so too is the *rasika*, and criticism is akin to genius”⁴⁵. This is a return to the method of Pater, and Coomaraswamy rejected the theory of art for art’s sake.

The *rasas* accepted by Indian critics are nine. These, says Coomaraswamy are “arbitrary terms of rhetoric”. Here again he follows the unfortunate doctrine of Croce, though he could get some support also from Indian

